

PLUCK AND LUCK

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STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

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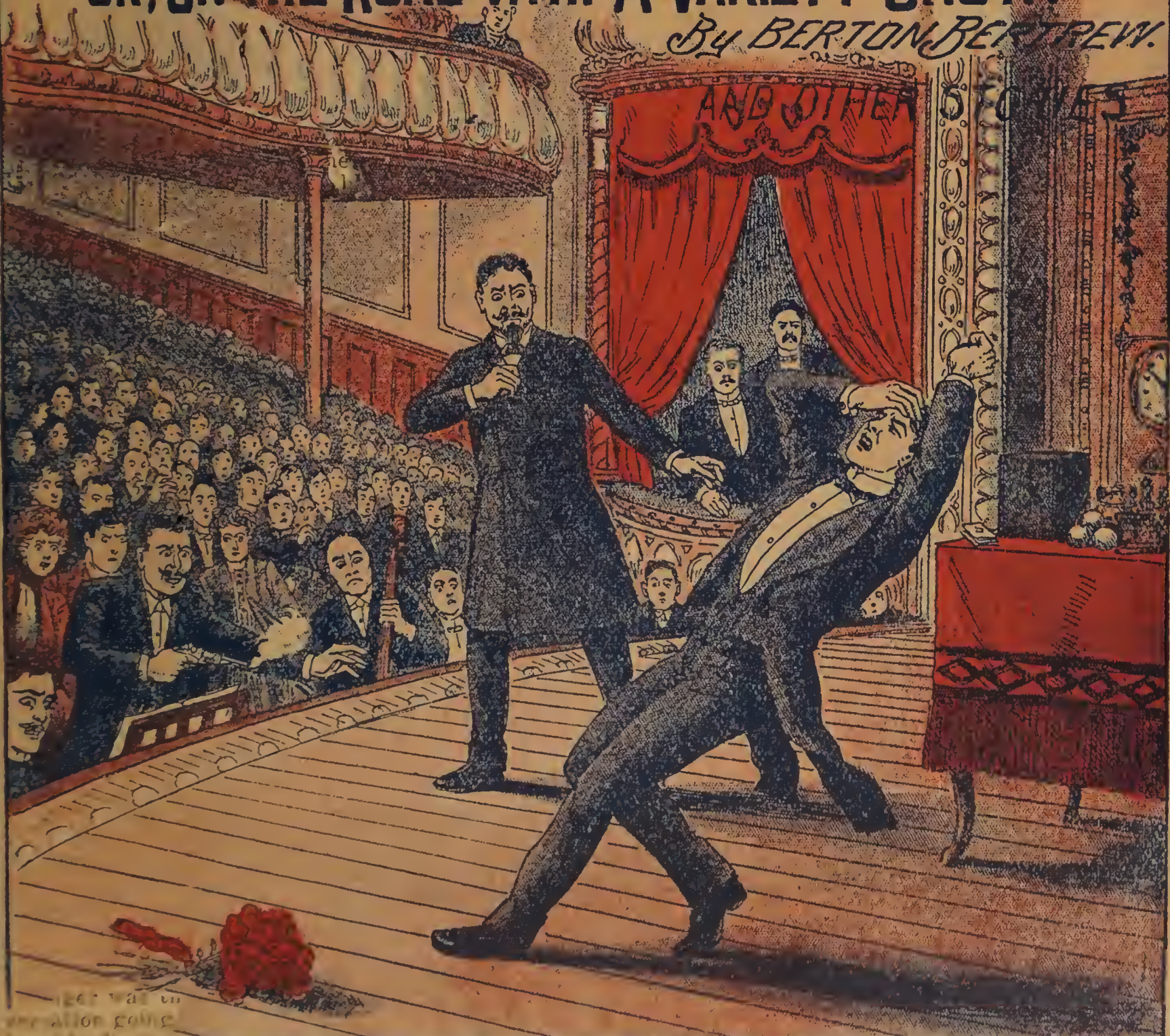
No. 1238

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 22, 1922

Price 7 Cents

HERMAN, THE BOY MAGICIAN; OR, ON THE ROAD WITH A VARIETY SHOW.

By BERTON BERTRENN.



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Herman, The Boy Magician

OR, ON THE ROAD WITH A VARIETY SHOW

By AN OLD SCOUT

CHAPTER I.—A Mystery.

It was a dark, stormy night in March, and the wind was howling furiously through the deserted streets, on the suburbs of Boston. Rain poured down in torrents, the murky sky was rent by vivid flashes of lightning, and thunder roared heavily. As a bell in a steeple rang out the hour of nine, a boy of about sixteen might have been seen stealthily approaching an old ramshackle cottage, in one window of which a dim light was glowing. He was of medium size, clad in shabby garments, which were drenched by the rain, and had a thin, dark countenance, black, piercing eyes and a air of anxious alarm, painful to see.

"I dread to go in," he muttered wistfully, as he paused at the window. "If I tell Benjamin Crabb the bad news he'll kill me!"

A shudder convulsed the poor boy as he thought of the ordeal he was bound to undergo, and he quickly crept to the door, opened it, and entered the dark, musty hall. No sooner had this been done, when he heard the voices of two men coming from within the room where the light was. He paused irresolutely, not knowing for a moment what to do, his heart beating like a trip-hammer with suppressed fear, and a cold, clammy perspiration bursting out all over him. There was a round hole in the door, where a lock had been removed, through which the boy could see into the room, and he peered through. The man with whom he lived met his view, and he proved to be an ugly-looking hunchback, who wore a ragged suit. His eyes bulged, he had a hooked nose, a huge mouth containing a few yellow, fang-like teeth, and a bristly gray beard almost hid his features from view. The apartment he occupied was a shabby dining-room. The other man was tall, of a military bearing, and wore a caped coat and a slouched hat, which nearly concealed the long, black imperial and fierce mustache adorning his florid face. Herman, the boy, had seen this soldierly-looking man at the cottage once every year, as far back as he could remember, but never knew the reason of his calls, as Crabb invariably sent him out immediately after the gentleman's arrival. Upon seeing the major, as Crabb called his caller, the boy lost his dread before an absorbing curiosity to learn why the stranger was there, and now listened to the conversation going on inside. It was evident that the hunchback was excited, for he ripped out an oath, slapped the table with his fist, and roared:

"So this is your last visit here, eh? It is, eh?"

"Hush!" exclaimed the major, in calm, cool tones. "Don't you get excited, Crabb. It won't do you any good."

"But, blast it, do you imagine I'm to be put off this way—eh? Oh, no! Ho, ho! not much! I've taken care of that boy since he was a child, haven't I, eh? Didn't I do my duty well?"

"Of course you did, as long as I have paid you \$500 per year for doing it," replied the other in hard, metallic tones. "But, the fact is, I am tired of paying this money, and intend to quit."

"No, you won't!" roared the hunchback savagely. "Do you think I'm going to support him for nothing, eh?"

"See here," replied the major, shrugging his shoulders indifferently, "I don't care whether you do or not. You taught him all the tricks you knew when you were a professional conjurer on the stage, and now make money out of Herman by making him perform in public every time he can get work——"

"Why," gasped the startled boy, "they are speaking of me!"

He had cause to be astonished, for Crabb had always led him to imagine he was an orphan whom he had taken from an asylum and legally adopted. Now to learn that the major had always been paying Crabb to support him set him to wondering why it was done. With his interest intensified and his face pale with agitation, Herman saw the hunchback glare at his caller a moment like a wild beast, and then say in hoarse tones:

"Supposing I did make the lad work—is that any of your business, as long as I fed, clothed and educated him, eh? Now I want you to understand one thing, and that is, if you stop paying me I'll tell him his whole story——"

"Fool!" interrupted the other, for a moment losing his temper. "You could not prove anything——"

"Ho, ho," the dwarf chuckled. "Couldn't I, though? Now perhaps you may remember the secret this contains, eh? And if Herman got it, what would happen then?"

As he spoke he drew a small, flat steel box from his breast pocket and held it up with an exultant look on his ugly face. It was a singular looking box, about the size of an ordinary envelope, half an inch thick, and was closed with a peculiar lock invisible on the exterior. For a moment there

was a deep silence in the room, and then with a diabolical chuckle the hunchback cried:

"Well, what do you think of this, eh?"

The major uttered a smothered cry of alarm and turned pale.

"The box!" gasped the major. "I thought it was lost years ago."

"So I told you," grimly answered Crabb, "but I lied, for I had it all the time. You know what it contains, eh? Now if I were to open it, and Herman saw its contents, what would happen, eh? Wouldn't he know the entire mystery of his history?"

"Give me that box!" cried the major eagerly, as he bounded to his feet and strode toward Crabb in a threatening way.

"Never!" snarled the hunchback, as he recoiled and pulled a pistol from his pocket. "Stand back! If you move an inch further I'll shoot you! Stand back, I say! This is my trump card in the game we are playing, and I mean to hold it, too!"

As he found the cold barrel of the pistol staring him in the face the major paused and stepped back. Raising his hand, he cried in alarmed tones:

"Stop! Don't fire!"

"Will you continue the payments then?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Give me the money."

Darting a look of intense hatred at the dwarf the major pulled out his wallet, withdrew a bunch of banknotes of high denomination from it and flung them on the table.

"There!" he hissed furiously.

"Good! Do you see that door, eh?" demanded Crabb.

"Well? What about the door?"

"Go! Leave this house! I'm through with you."

"Very well. I'm glad to get out of your company, you beast!"

"And don't you forget I've got this box. The moment you refuse to keep your bargain with me I'll show Herman its contents, and you will be a ruined man!"

"I may baffle you yet," the major exclaimed, as an evil look crossed his stern features. "If that boy should die suddenly——"

"Ha! You threaten murder——"

"If Herman should die, your grip on me would cease!"

And as the major hurled this hidden threat at the hideous hunchback, a mocking laugh escaped his lips, and he strode to the door and flung it open. The boy barely had time to retreat back in the gloom to escape detection, and the major rushed out and banged the front door behind him so hard that the house shook. Herman's heart was throbbing fast, and his mind was in a whirl, for he had unearthed a strange, secret mystery about himself that filled him with amazement and alarm.

"What does it all mean, I wonder?" he thought.

"It's clear Benjamin is nothing to me, and that there is a mystery about my origin of the greatest importance. Who, then, are my parents? Why have I never been given any other name besides that of Herman? How can I—oh, good heavens, Crabb is coming out into the hall!"

A panic seized him, for he saw the light moving, and he recoiled to the farthest corner and crouched there, for there was no place in which he could conceal himself. In a moment more the hunchback appeared holding the lamp in his hand, and a chill of horror passed over the boy as he thought that Crabb would see that he had heard all. The hunchback had come out to lock the door after the major, and as he did so and turned around, his glance fell on the boy. For a moment he simply stood glaring at Herman. Then he recovered from his surprise and gasped chokingly:

"What! You here?"

"Oh, don't get mad at me," pleaded Herman, in accents of the most intense fear, for the sight of Crabb had thrown him in a panic, as the hunchback always treated him harshly.

The dwarf deliberately set the lamp down on the stairs. He then picked up a piece of broom handle from a corner and facing the trembling boy again he growled:

"How long have you been here, eh?"

"Only a little while," protested the unfortunate little fellow.

"And heard all we said, I suppose?"

"But, Benjamin, indeed I could not help it."

"Why ain't you working in the theater tonight?"

"Because no show was given. The manager disappeared with the box office receipts, and none of us got a cent of our salary."

"What!" yelled Crabb, in a sudden paroxysm of fury, and he rushed up to the boy and clutched him by the throat with his left hand. "And you have no money, eh? You lie, you thief, you got your money and spent it, or you mean to cheat me out of it. But I'll get it out of you and teach you to lie and sneak around listening to my private business. Take that, you viper, and that—and that!"

And every time he spoke he kicked Herman and struck him with the club, until it seemed as if he would kill his victim. With cries of pain and tears of anguish, the poor boy struggled with his vicious tormentor about the narrow hall until a savage blow from the club knocked him down, shrieking:

"Oh, you'll kill me—you'll kill me!"

CHAPTER II.—The Farmer's Dog.

As the brutal hunchback glared down at the pale face of the boy, and he saw the awful bruises, cuts and abrasions he had inflicted, the fear crept into his mind that he had gone too far. He uttered a ferocious imprecation and recoiled. Little Herman staggered to his feet. He was dazed for a moment by his terrible punishment, but he quickly rallied, and every particle of fear he had always felt for Crabb vanished in an instant. It dawned upon his mind that this brute would murder him if he passively submitted to many more of these awful beatings, and a sullen, rebellious feeling entered his brain.

"Ho, ho," the dwarf chuckled, feeling intensely relieved to see him get upon his feet again. "So you ain't dead yet, eh?"

"Dead," the boy answered bitterly. "No, and you'll never do that again, you monster—never! Never!"

The last word fairly was screamed. Crabb was astonished at Herman's resentment.

"I won't, eh?" he growled. "Well, we'll see."

And he rushed at the boy again, his angry temper rising and a resolve in his mind to subdue Herman with one blow. But the young magician's temper was aroused, too, and to the astonishment of the dwarf, Herman dealt him a blow between the eyes that fairly staggered him. He began to rave, threaten and swear horribly, but the boy followed up his advantage, and seizing the club, he tore it from his assailant's hands.

"Drop that!" yelled the dwarf wildly, "or I'll flay you!"

"You'll never beat me again!" cried the excited boy, and he aimed a terrific blow at Crabb's head with the club.

There came a resounding whack, and uttering a groan, Crabb plunged forward and fell stunned to the floor. A cry of alarm escaped Herman. He imagined he had killed the man.

"I'll get hung for this!" he muttered, as a fit of violent trembling seized him. "Good Lord, I believe he's dead!"

He dropped the club, and falling on his knees beside the hunchback, he turned him over and felt of his heart. It was still beating. Reassured by this, the boy uttered a sigh of relief.

"Only stunned," he muttered. "He's only stunned. And when he revives I'll be as bad off as ever. He will take a fearful revenge upon me for this. I'd better run away. It's as much as my life is worth to remain here now. But before I go I'll have that strange box, the contents of which perhaps may explain the mystery of my past."

With feverish haste he felt in Crabb's breast pocket and, withdrawing the box, he rose to his feet. Running to the door, he unlocked it and dashed out into the rainstorm at the top of his speed. Poor Herman! He did not care much where he went as long as he got out of Crabb's reach. For aught he knew the old scoundrel might die, and he would be arrested on a serious charge.

"I'll leave the city!" flashed across his mind.

And so thinking, he sped away into the country, and did not stop running until he was breathless and exhausted, and had left Boston far behind. The boy was in a desperate plight. He did not have a cent, he had no food or shelter, his dress suit and magic paraphernalia were at the theater in the city where he had been performing, and he did not know where to go. But he did not think of these obstacles. He could only think of getting as far away from the scene of all his past sorrows as rapidly as possible.

A new, strange feeling of manhood had suddenly sprung up in his breast when he turned on Crabb, for hitherto he had always been in such deadly terror of the man that he had submitted to past abuses without resentment. Now a sensation of utter freedom from his bonds of misery awaited him, and made him exult and cry with joy. He came to a pause at last under a tree, and there he crouched behind the trunk, regaining his breath and strength. Then he thought over the situation and muttered:

"Thank heaven I am free! I'll never go back to Crabb. I've got to make my own way in the world now, and I ain't afraid to do it. The best

thing I can do will be to find some kind of shelter from this storm; then to-morrow I'll push on to the nearest town and see if I can't get work of some kind."

There was a muddy road near by, and as he followed it for some distance in the pelting rain, he finally saw by a flash of lightning a farmhouse to the right. It had several barns around it, and as one of them gave promise of being just what he wanted, he headed for it. Herman soon reached it, his head sore and aching from the beating he got, and finding an open window, he climbed in and listened. There were some horses and cows in the place; he could tell by the sounds, and a flash of lightning soon showed him the ladder leading to the hay loft.

He mounted it, and creeping under the hay he fell fast asleep, leaving his wet clothing spread on the floor to dry. On the following morning the storm was gone, and the sun shone into the loft through a dusty, broken window. The boy crept out from under the hay, and as he did so he suddenly caught view of another person in the loft. This personage was also half buried in the hay, and at once dodged out of sight when Herman made his appearance.

"It's the farmer," muttered the boy uneasily.

And under the hay he dodged, too. He finally poked up his head again, and now saw the man intently and anxiously eying him. Once more the stranger dove out of sight.

"The farmer wouldn't act that way," cogitated Herman.

With this conviction he resolutely rose, and as the man kept quiet and out of sight, the boy put on his clothing, which was then comparatively dry. This operation had hardly been completed, when he caught view of the man peeping out of the hay at him again.

"Hello, there!" he exclaimed, determined to bring matters to a climax. "Why don't you show yourself, old fellow?"

There was a great stir in the hay at this, and finally the man emerged and stood up keenly watching the boy. He was a remarkable-looking person, his tall, lanky legs, encased in tight pants, a shabby Prince Albert coat covering his shambling figure, and a battered stove-pipe hat on his long hair. Hollow-eyed, with a clean-shaven, cadaverous face, and a long, red nose, a pair of worn cotton gloves on his hands and a faded umbrella under his arm he struck a tragic attitude, and remarked loftily:

"Well, sir, I trust I meet your approval."

"Ain't you the farmer?" asked Herman curiously.

"No. A farmer, sir? Never! But you are, I presume——"

"I am not. I stole in here last night to sleep."

"Ha, ha! And I, too. Youngster, we are in the same boat, as it were. Shake hands. Bless my soul, I feel quite relieved."

"And so do I," laughed Herman, shaking hands with him. "If you ain't the farmer, who the deuce are you, then?"

"What!" replied the other, in aggrieved tones, "is it possible you fail to recognize me? Everybody from Maine to Florida knows me. In me you see the only original J. Sheridan Snooks."

"Indeed," said Herman, not at all impressed by this fact.

"Yes, my lad, the celebrated and only Snooks, late of the Globe Theater, Boston, and now on my way to New York. I am an actor."

He flourished his rusty umbrella, doffed his old plug hat and made such a profound bow that Herman had to laugh outright.

"I am glad to meet a fellow professional," said the boy, "for I, too, am on the boards when I can secure employment."

"Can it be possible? What is your line?"

"Variety. I am known as Herman, the Boy Magician."

"You don't say so! I have heard of you. My dear boy, you do a great act. And are you en route for any particular quarter?"

"Well, no," hesitatingly answered the boy. "But I'll tell you my story, and perhaps you might advise me what to do."

He had taken a sudden fancy to this eccentric character, and now longed for the friendship and sympathy of a kindred spirit, and told Snooks what had befallen him. The actor listened attentively, and when Herman finished he said in kind and fatherly tones:

"I'll be hanged if I ain't sorry for you, my boy. But cheer up. Join your fortunes with mine. I'm as poor as a church mouse now, although I have seen better days. Together we might make a living."

"I will gladly do so—gladly!" eagerly assented the boy.

"Then let us leave this hospitable shelter and take to the high road. I do not disdain riding, but—alas and alack! I have no filthy lucre to defray the expense of railroad fares, and hence we must depend upon shanks' mare to carry us to the next town."

He sighed as he made this apologetic statement, but the boy did not mind the tramp, as long as there was now a prospect ahead, and they left the loft. Unfortunately for them, the farmer saw them emerging from the barn, and as they looked like a couple of tramps he yelled at them.

"Hi, you scoundrels, get out of there?"

"Run!" exclaimed Herman, "he's coming!"

"Worse than that!" groaned Snooks, "he's unchaining his dog."

The beast in question was a savage-looking mastiff which was barking furiously at them from his kennel. Away they ran for the road at full speed. But they had not taken a dozen steps before the dog was loose and came rushing after them at a swift pace. The brute reached them ere they gained the fence, and with one bound it sprang upon Herman, fastened its teeth in his shoulder, and a shriek of pain escaped the boy.

CHAPTER III.—On the Stage.

A thrill of horror passed through the old actor when he saw the peril Herman was in, for the shock of the impact of the dog's heavy body had hurled the young magician to the ground. The farmer, armed with a pitchfork, and thinking he had done a very smart deed, came running toward them. Snooks saw that the mastiff would tear

the boy to pieces unless he was driven away at once. Although the actor was not armed, he quickly picked up a few large stones, and rushing close to the dog, he hurled one at its head with all his strength.

Bang! went the missile against the brute's skull. A growl escaped its jaws, it relinquished its grip on the boy, and it rolled over, howling dismally. Crash! went a second stone, almost breaking the animal's head, and it was stunned by the blow. Whiz! went the last stone toward the farmer, and it caught him on the shin, knocked him down and wrung a volley of oaths and yells of pain from his mouth.

"Bull's-eye!" chuckled Snooks. "Verily, I have smote the Philistines with the unerring aim of a William Tell."

"Good for you," panted Herman, scrambling to his feet and seeing what occurred. "But come, let's get away before that old rascal recovers and gives us more trouble."

They climbed over the fence and sped along the road. Nor did they pause until they were far from the farm. Snooks then examined the boy's injured shoulder and found there were several lacerated wounds from the dog's teeth. They pained him a great deal, but were improved with a wash from a brook, and the two hastened on again. Several miles further along they encountered a kind-hearted farmer's wife who gave them a good breakfast. After that they resumed their tramp, feeling in better spirits. The boy was pondering deeply as he went ahead, and finally said to his companion:

"I've been thinking of a way by which we might gain some money, but there is one difficulty that troubles me."

"Yea, verily, and what might that be?" queried Snooks, with a show of eager interest, for he had been trying to devise a means for them to get along and made a dismal failure of it.

"Why," replied the boy, "there is to be a variety show at Fairtown to-night, according to the paper I saw, and the manager might put us both on to do a turn to help us out."

"Ah, I doubt it. Barnstormers are a heartless species of humanity," replied the old veteran sadly, shaking his head, "and scarcely make enough to carry themselves through without having their shows attached, let alone adding to the expense by two foreign appendages."

"Yes, but I am well known and a good card at Fairtown, and if that was proven we might get a job."

"Oh, that's different. Permit me to say you've got a great nut, my dear boy. We can try the plan——"

"Wait. There's a difficulty I mentioned."

"And that?" asked Snooks, losing his enthusiasm.

"My costume and implements are at the Boston theater yet."

"That's bad—decidedly bad. Can't we get them?"

"Only by sending. I wouldn't go back for anything."

"But—er—oh—have you the money to pay for expressage?"

"Not a cent," replied the boy.

"What a pity," sighed Snooks mournfully.

"The express companies never trust people in our profession, and I'll be blest if I know any one in Fairtown who would advance the necessary amount."

"Perhaps something may turn up when we reach the town which will aid us out of our difficulty."

"Ah, how hopeful you are. Well, that goes with youth and inexperience, my boy. Still, after all we may as well wish that as to take a gloomy view of the case. Look there—ye gods—I see Fairtown ahead half a mile around that bend in the road."

Both felt glad, for they were fatigued by their long walk, and the town might afford them a place of rest for a while. When they reached the place they found it well billed with brilliant three-sheet posters, announcing the fact that the Great American Vaudeville Co. would open at the Opera House that night. But what pleased Snooks most was the name of Dick Murphy, the manager of the show, printed on the lithographs.

"I'm well acquainted with him," chuckled the old fellow. "He's one of the worst dead beats who frequents the Rialto in search of an 'angel' to back a show. But he's a good fellow when he's got the money, and will see us through when he learns that I'm stranded——"

"Stranded?" asked Herman quickly.

"Hem! Er—yes. I didn't tell you my history, did I? Well, I'll confess. I signed in Chicago with the Money King Co., doing heavies. When we got as far as Boston we played to such poor business, the company went to pieces, and I struck out for New York on foot."

"Oh, I see," said Herman, with a smile. "Now, since you have been so confidential I'll give you my biography. I've lived with Crabb as long as I can remember. He was an expert conjurer and taught me all his tricks. He also had a brutal disposition, and I got more abuse than blessings from him. When he discovered that I could earn money, he quit the profession, and between the five hundred a year he got from the major, and the money I earned, we managed to live in a miserable way."

"Your life was uneventful enough then until last night."

"Very," replied Herman, "and I'm glad to get away from him."

"Well, I'll leave you here at this little hotel, my boy, and hunt up Dick Murphy. Don't go away until I return."

And so saying, Snooks cocked his hat on one side of his head, stuck out his bosom, and strode away with a grand and pompous air. Fully an hour passed before he returned, and then his gait was rather unsteady, his eyes had a fishy look, and his breath smelt of whisky.

"He's been drinking!" muttered Herman. "I thought he was an old soak and now my suspicion is confirmed."

A grin of joy overspread the old actor's smooth face as he ambled up to Herman, and he waved his hat and umbrella and cried:

"Hurrah, Herman! I've struck it."

"What do you mean?" anxiously asked the young magician.

"Wor, bless your heart, I've seen Murphy; he said he could go on to-night and he gave me a

couple of dollars to boot. Not only that, but he's going to send a messenger to Boston for your things. Come with me, my boy, come with me to the Opera House and you can write an order for your traps so's to have them here for to-night's performance."

Herman was delighted at this good news. The old actor linked arms with him, and they started off. In a few minutes they reached the Opera House, where Herman was introduced to the manager, who proved to be a short, fat fellow in a loud suit of clothes, his face decorated with red side whiskers. He was an affable, insinuating man, with quick, snappy ways, and readily sent a messenger for Herman's things. Upon hearing that the young magician was a drawing card at Fairtown, he had a sign painted, hired a wagon with a driver, put in the theater band and had the advertisement paraded through the streets, announcing the appearance of Herman and Snooks with the show.

Before nightfall every one knew that the boy magician was to appear, and many resolved to go to the play who would otherwise have remained away from it. Indeed, there was an early rush for seats, and long before the time for the performance to begin there was a packed house, and the sign out of "Standing Room Only." Murphy was delighted, for it was the largest audience he had seen in several weeks, and the inquiries at the box office painly told him that the good luck came from Herman being billed to appear there that night. The boy had received his outfit from Boston, much to his delight, and went to his dressing-room to get ready. Snooks was already there, and Herman put on his dress suit, and while taking out his tricks he asked:

"What sort of a turn are you going to do, Snooks?"

"Funny monologue and imitations, my boy," drowsily answered the old fellow, as he took a flask of whisky from his pocket and held it up. "Here's how, Herman, and——"

"Not another drop!" exclaimed the boy, snatching away the bottle. "You are half full now. Do you want to get so helpless that you won't be able to go on?"

"Give me that bottle, Herman. You surprise me!"

"No, sir—not until you finish your act."

"Well," exclaimed Snooks, in astonishment, as he drew a deep breath and stared at the boy, "you've got a nerve to boss me this way."

"I don't wish to offend you," replied the boy, "but you can have your choice—either quit me or this liquor. Which shall it be?"

For an instant there was a painful silence. Then Snooks sighed, shook his head and muttered:

"You are right, Herman, and I'm an old fool!"

And so saying, he strode from the dressing-room. The boy smiled over his victory and continued his preparations. The orchestra struck up the overture, and the curtain went up. The scene in the wings and behind the drop curtain would have reminded a spectator of a masquerade ball. At one side the soubrette in a pretty pink costume was chatting with a funny Dutch comedian with a huge stomach, a red wig, and a white duck suit, wooden shoes and a little hat.

Two black-faced, knock-about, acrobatic wing-

dancers were playing a game of poker on an inverted tub, while waiting for their cues, the scene shifters and carpenter were dodging about among the Irish gaggers and the sketch team, and the gas man stood in the prompt corner attending to his lights. A pair of trapeze performers were then on the stage whirling and tumbling about in a blaze of spangles and calcium light effects, and the lady serpentine dancer was preparing a strip costume to do a quick change turn as a wire-walker. In ten minutes the trapeze act ended in a round of applause, and the stage was set for Herman's turn as a parlor interior, with two fancy-covered tables, holding his conjuring implements.

"Ready!" cried the manager. "Raise that sky-border and drop the ceiling. Run off that right second flat. That will do. Turn on the lights in those upper battens. All right. All off. Clear the stage."

He clapped his hands and the curtain rose as the music began. Herman was ready at his entrance. The boy had a singularly aristocratic look in his well-fitting dress suit; his hair was neatly combed and his dark features were well in keeping with the style of his performance. As he strode out on the stage round after round of applause greeted his appearance, and the music stopped playing. He walked to the footlights bowing, and when silence was restored he made a few well chosen remarks about his act, and then picked up a pistol from the table, an imitation bullet and a charge of powder.

"My first experiment," he said to the audience, "will be to prove that I am invulnerable to bullets. Will some gentleman in the audience kindly step up here and load this pistol to prove there is no fake about it?"

"I will," said a man in the lower left-hand box. He climbed over the railing upon the stage.

"Great heavens!" gasped the boy, glaring at him. "It's the major!"

And so it was, and he had an evil look on his face, too. Herman quickly recovered his composure, for he knew it would not do to betray any agitation before the audience. He bowed, smiled, and handed the pistol to his enemy, saying:

"Please load it, sir, so all can see you."

"I shall," said the major, and he set about it.

He had a small cartridge concealed in his hand when he did it, and adroitly dropped that in the pistol, too, without being detected.

"If any one fires at him he is a dead boy!" he thought grimly.

When he handed back the pistol Herman called for another man, and when a gentleman responded, he handed the man the pistol and said:

"You fire at me and I'll catch the bullet between my teeth."

The stranger nodded, stepped back, aimed the pistol at Herman and fired. The young magician uttered a wild cry and staggered back with a terrible wound on his head.

and a roar of voices rose all over the theater. The their feet, women screamed and fainted, supes and actors rushed from the wings upon the stage, and a road of voices rose all over the theater. The major stood looking on with an expression of diabolical exultation, for he realized that his treacherous trick had been a success. Filled with horror, the gentleman who shot the boy turned pale, dropped the pistol from his nerveless hand and groaned:

"Great heaven! What have I done?"

The policeman who had rushed up seized the man.

"It's your fault!" he exclaimed. "You are my prisoner!"

"But he asked me to fire at him," faltered the agitated man. "I thought it was a trick pistol."

"That makes no difference to me."

"Is he dead?"

"Here's a doctor," said a woman. "He'll see."

The most skilful physician in Fairtown had come upon the stage and examined Herman's wound. During the excitement the major slipped away unseen and left the theater as rapidly as possible. Snooks was frightened into sobriety. The manager, Dick Murphy, rushed up to him with a worried look upon his face and cried:

"Blast the luck, that's the end of the Great American Vaudeville Co. This confounded accident has given the show a black eye, Snooks."

"By the gods, it's awful!" gasped the old actor, who was greatly unnerved.

"Why don't they arrest the man who loaded that pistol, as well as the person who fired it?" roared Murphy excitedly.

"Where is he?" demanded the policeman, in eager tones.

A canvass of the crowd was made at once, but as the major had directly fled he was not to be found.

"He has disappeared," announced Snooks presently, in savage tones.

"Then I'll run in the man who fired the shot," said the policeman.

"Hold on there!" interposed a boyish voice just then.

The crowd parted, and Herman appeared, holding up his hand. Glancing at him in startled surprise, the policeman gasped:

"What! Ain't you hurt?"

"It's only a scalp wound," explained the doctor. "He's in no danger."

"Let that man go," said the boy to the policeman. "It was not his fault. The man who loaded the pistol was an enemy of mine. He must have put something in the weapon to injure me."

The policeman promptly released his prisoner, much to that individual's relief, and Snooks exclaimed excitedly:

"Officer, away with you! Discover and arrest the base scoundrel who strove to kill this lad. If there's law in this land, I swear that fiend shall receive his merited punishment."

Thinking he might capture the major, the policeman ran off, and the manager shouted to the crowd:

"Return to your seats, ladies and gentlemen, and the show will go on as if nothing happened."

His order was complied with. The curtain was rung down, and Herman ran into his dressing-

CHAPTER IV.—Attaching the Show.

A moment after Herman was shot he fell heavily to the floor, and the audience was thrown in

room, followed by Snooks. The doctor had bathed and plastered the wound on the boy's head, but his make-up had been spoiled, showing the cuts and bruises that had been inflicted. He had been careful to conceal these blemishes before going on, and now he touched up his face again.

"My dear boy, you had better lie down," said Snooks.

"What!" the boy replied. "Not much. I'm going on again."

"Going on! Are you mad—in that state——"

"Oh, I'm all right. My head pains a little, but I feel quite able to finish my act. We've got to earn our salary, you know, or Murphy will be angry."

"But I won't let you if you don't feel right."

"Don't worry. I'll finish my turn, or—or bust."

"He's a spunky little chap," thought Snooks admiringly.

In a few minutes Herman made himself presentable, the curtain rose and the boy strode smilingly upon the stage. The applause that greeted his appearance was tremendous. The audience admired his courage. He bowed his acknowledgment again and again, and as soon as order was restored, he continued his part of the performance by repeating the experiment which had nearly cost his life. The wildest enthusiasm greeted this effort. He then gave an exhibition of the most dexterous feats of sleight-of-hand with cards, coins and other objects, and finally concluded with the most marvelous acts in black magic. The boy was the hit of the evening. He was recalled before the footlights a dozen times and only managed to escape after making a brief speech. When he reached his dressing-room, Murphy came in.

"Herman," said he, in his hearty, pleasant way, "you are a wonder. I'm glad I booked you. As a drawing card you'll keep this house packed for a week."

"I'm glad that incident happened, then," laughed the boy, "for I didn't expect more than a one-night stand with you."

"Oh, I'll keep you altogether with the company if you'll sign, and I'll pay you \$40 per week."

"How about Snooks?"

"Why, he can remain, too, but—at a lower figure."

"Very well; we'll sign after the show."

"Do you want any money on account to close the deal?"

"Well, I haven't got a cent."

"Here's ten dollars then."

A thrill of joy passed through the boy as he took the money, and realized that this engagement would lift him and Snooks from the depths of poverty to the pinnacle of good living for a while. Murphy meant what he said, for he realized that the boy was a strong attraction for his company.

"You can meet me in the box office afterwards," said he, as he went out, "and we'll settle the matter."

"Thank you—I shall," replied the boy.

A few minutes afterward Snooks entered with a radiant smile on his cadaverous face and his hand outstretched.

"Shake, my boy, shake," he chuckled, grasping Herman's hand and violently pump-handling it in

the exuberance of his joy. "Murphy told me the good news. We are made now."

"It certainly is a streak of good luck," laughed Herman, "for we needed the work bad enough."

"Oh, I tell you, we are the people."

"Say, Snooks, what did you think of the trick the major played upon me by trying to get me killed?"

A serious, thoughtful expression settled upon the old actor's features, and he revolved the question in his mind. Finally he replied:

"It was beastly. Absolutely brutal. And it carries out your story of what happened at the hunchback's house. To me it is very clear that you somehow stand in the major's way. He wants to wipe you out of existence, so as to get rid of the payments he is obliged to annually make to Crabb for your support. But why is it thus?"

"You mean," the boy replied, "what is the secret of my existence, which causes the major to fear me?"

"Precisely so. It must be very potent."

"It's a mystery to me, Snooks; a deep, strange mystery."

"Perhaps you might solve it if you could open that peculiar metal box," suggested the actor significantly.

"I've tried to do so several times," answered Herman, "but it is impossible. I'll have to get an expert to open it. Crabb claimed that if I saw what the box contained the major would be a ruined man. I wonder if the major knew I had the box and tracked me here to try to get it, or make an effort to kill me?"

"He may know you have the box," answered Snooks thoughtfully, "but it's my belief that his appearance here to-night was simply the result of chance. He will now doubtless watch the papers to learn the result of your injuries, provided he eludes capture by the police; and it is barely possible that he may keep on your track when he finds out how he failed in his design, and have another try at you."

"Just my opinion," said the boy in grave tones.

The major was a desperate enemy, he realized, and would not stop at anything to make way with him. It was eleven o'clock before the house was emptied, and Herman and Snooks went out the stage entrance and around to the lobby to meet Murphy in the box office. As they passed into the little compartment they saw the manager and a sheriff and hotelkeeper there. An excited conversation was going on, and Murphy turned to the boy with a despairing look and exclaimed:

"We are all done for, Herman."

"Why, what is the matter?" asked the boy in alarm.

"Our receipts, scenery and costumes are all attached by the sheriff for some bills we left unpaid the last time I was here."

"Thunder!" ejaculated Herman in dismay.

And poor Snooks sank helplessly into a chair and groaned. Their bright hopes for the future had been rudely and most cruelly dashed by this unexpected blow. For a few moments there ensued a deep silence.

"It's unfortunate, I know, gentlemen," said the sheriff, in grim tones, "but I must do my duty."

A bitter feeling assailed Herman. He glanced at his companion in misery, and exclaimed:

"Snooks, we are as badly off now as we were before."

CHAPTER V.—The Man in the Dark.

It seemed to Herman and his companion that they were pursued by a streak of bad luck. The young magician thought the matter over a few minutes, and then an idea occurred to him. He turned to the sheriff with a startled look and asked:

"Is my trunk of costumes and apparatus attached, too?"

"Of course it is," was the emphatic reply.

"But I am not a member of this company."

"You were acting with them as one of the company."

"Very true, but I have no contract with them. You therefore have no right to seize my things."

"Excuse me, young fellow, but all you say don't have any effect with me. I ain't going to let up on your things unless I'm directed to do so by process of law."

"That settles it," Herman muttered. "I hoped to save my traps so I could use them in some other show. Now I can't get them without a lawyer, and I haven't got money to hire one. I say, Murphy, are you going to square this judgment?"

"I don't see how I can, as I haven't got the cash," the manager answered dolefully. "We are completely busted?"

Herman plainly saw that all was lost for the show. He therefore parted with Murphy, called Snooks, and they left the Opera House feeling sadly disappointed. When they reached the street the old actor rubbed his long red nose ruefully, and blinking his hollow eyes, he remarked:

"Well, bless my soul, if this isn't tough!"

"Don't give away," cheerfully answered the young magician. "Come on to a hotel. Murphy advanced me ten dollars, and we'll get our supper and go to bed."

"Ten dollars!" roared Snooks, brightening up suddenly. "Why, ye gods, that's a fortune. Herman, my boy, you delight me. Give me the money and I'll get a ball——"

"No more drinking," replied the boy with a frown of deep annoyance. "I'll keep the money. To-morrow we may need it."

Snooks sighed and wagged his head. Despite his grumbling, Herman led him to the hotel. There they put up for the night. After breakfast on the following morning, as they sat in the office, Herman picked up the country newspaper. The very first item that arrested his attention was an account of the accident that befell him the previous night. And the second article he observed was an account of the fact that the Electric Meteors, a variety troupe, were to open up on the following night (Monday) at the next town. It was a fairly large place, fourteen miles distant, and boasted of a small hall which was let for all sorts of purposes, including the presentation of plays and variety performances.

"Here's our chance!" exclaimed Herman eagerly.

"To what do you allude, may I ask?" said Snooks moodily.

"If we go on to Cherry Valley we might catch a snap with the Electric Meteors who open up there to-morrow night."

"Ha! You encourage me. But how could you fake through a show without costumes or apparatus?"

"Well," said the boy hopefully, "I'll have over five dollars left, and we may manage to buy a small outfit and hire a costume for that. We can't stay here doing nothing, can we?"

"True enough. What a brain you have for scheming, to be sure."

"Then we start to-morrow?"

"Most decidedly."

They hung about Fairtown all day, but became convinced that it would be impossible to secure Herman's effects without an expensive lawyer, and as they could not afford this, they at length abandoned all hope of recovering the trunk. On the following morning they boarded a train for Cherry Valley, and reached the town in an hour. The place was well billed, and by dint of a little inquiry, they located the hotel at which the company was stopping. Proceeding to the place and entering the office, they saw a crowd of about six men and women surrounding the owner's desk, holding an excited conversation with him. The flashy attire of the party at once attested to the fact that they were theatrical people.

"Just the ones we are searching for," murmured Snooks in satisfied tones. "We must work our way into their ranks to-night, Herman, if I have to dislocate my jaw jollying the manager."

"They seem to be in trouble," replied the boy dubiously.

"Oh, a mere nothing, no doubt. The profession, my dear fellow, are prone to find trouble of some sort or another most everywhere they go if they look for it."

"I wonder who is engineering this company?"

"Allow me to discover."

He straightened up, raked his hat over his eye, and assuming his loftiest air, he strode majestically up to a little fat man.

"Ahem! My friend," he began, tapping the stout party on the shoulder, "excuse me; I wish to see the manager."

The fat man sized Snooks up from head to heels.

"He flew the coop," was his laconic reply.

"Hey?" gasped Snooks in astonishment.

"Froze to the dough and skedaddled," was the slangy response.

"Jerusalem," gasped the actor, in dazed tones.

"Fact. We're stranded, and on our uppers without a sou-markee to pay expenses or to get back home."

"Well, great guns!" gasped Snooks, an absolutely sick look sweeping over his bony face. "Herman, and was it to hear this horrible news we came all the way from Fairtown?"

The boy magician felt rattled, but he quickly turned the matter over in his mind and asked the stranger:

"Ain't you going to give your performance to-night?"

"Not on your natural," replied the fat man. "How can we? There isn't a bone in the crowd to pay for the hall, and the prop won't hang us up for it. He's been burnt before, cull."

"Perhaps I might help you out," suggested Herman.

"I think nit. These guys are all onto our curves."

"Wait," said Herman quietly. "Where's the hotel proprietor?"

"I'm the man," said a shrewd-looking man, stepping forward.

All the rest had ceased speaking to listen to what the boy was saying, and Herman said to the hotelkeeper:

"How much do these people owe you?"

"Two days' board for the party. The manager got away last night with all the money and not one of them are paid."

"I'll tell you how you can get your money."

"Well, I wish you would."

"If you'll guarantee payment for the hall——"

"No, sir! No, sir! What, lose that, too? Not much."

"Hold on. Listen to me. You secure the hall and we'll give the show under my management. You can act as cashier, and deduct your bill and that of the hall owner. If any money is left we'll divide it between us."

"By jingo, that's a good proposition."

"You can bet your life it is!"

"Do as the lad says, boss."

"That little fellow is a peach!"

These and other comments rose from the admiring actors on all sides, for Herman's plan just suited them.

"Who are you, anyway?" asked the hotelkeeper.

"Great Caesar," interposed Snooks with the grandest flourish of his old umbrella; "is it possible you don't know him? Why, that lad is known from Maine to Florida. Ladies and gentlemen, in him you behold the great and only phenomenal child wonder, Herman, the Boy Magician. And I, ladies and gents, am J. Sheridan Snooks, the celebrated expounder of dramatic heavies and Shakespearian leads!"

Biff! went his umbrella on the floor, he crossed his legs, stuck one hand in his bosom and tossed back his head. The hotelkeeper liked Herman's plan. Indeed, he resolved to run the risk of trying it, and finally signified it as his intention to do so. From that moment Herman was looked upon as a hero by the troupe, and they praised his ingenuity highly. The result was that the hall was secured for one night, and the stranded troupe gave the performance to a crowded house. They all tried hard to do their best work, and the show was considered one of the best ever given at Cherry Valley. Not only did the hall and hotel owners cover the amounts due to them, but each of the performers, including the young magician and the old actor, received a dividend of twenty dollars apiece. It was not necessary for Herman to go on, as he managed the entire exhibition, and was kept busy otherwise. Indeed, he could not have performed without his dress suit and the apparatus he had lost. When the boy left the hall with Snooks that night, he said:

"Now I've got money, I'll buy a new outfit at the nearest city, Snooks, and we'll then manage to get along all right."

"Excellent plan, excellent plan," commented the actor approvingly.

Upon reaching the hotel they were assigned to

a room and retired, leaving their clothing upon the chairs. The excitement had so wearied them that they soon fell fast asleep. It was perhaps three hours later when Herman was suddenly awakened by hearing a loud crash in the room. It was caused by a chair being knocked over. He sat bolt upright in bed and listened intently. The room was enshrouded in utter darkness. But he heard some one moving at the bedside. A moment afterward the cold muzzle of a revolver touched his head, and he heard a low, gruff voice exclaim:

"If you make a sound I'll kill you!"

"Heavens!" the boy muttered, as a chill of horror darted through him. "What is the meaning of this?"

He could not see who spoke to him, but he realized that his life at that moment was in extreme danger.

Snooks was sounding sleeping.

"Who are you?" asked Herman in low tones.

"You will never know. Speak again and I fire," answered the unknown, and he retreated toward the window, through which he sprang to the extension roof and so on to the ground. Snooks now woke up and asked what the trouble was. Herman explained. Then he was suspicious that he had been robbed. On searching his pants pockets he saw that every cent he had had been taken. On the following morning the landlord gave them their breakfast, saying he would not hold them responsible for their bill in view of what had happened.

Our two friends started out after breakfast and left Cherry Valley on foot, hoping to recover their misfortunes at some town they would strike.

On the way a carriage passed them and looking at the occupant, whom should Herman see but Major Oakdale. The carriage stopped and the major alighted. But Herman seized Snooks's arm and pulled him along, saying it was the man who was after his life. But the major ran after them and Herman was compelled to knock the man down. Then the two set off on a run. They neared a railroad track and saw a part passenger and freight train just pulling out. There was a side door open in one of the cars, and Herman and Snooks took refuge in it and hid among some gunnysacks in a corner of the car. Several miles were traveled in that way when they were seen by one of the brakemen and at the next place where the train stopped a couple of constables were notified of their presence. But Herman and Snooks were standing on the car platform as the constables approached. The engine had just started. The constables jumped on the car ahead of them. Then while Snooks seized the brake of the car they were on Herman pulled out the coupling pin and the train parted, leaving our two friends behind while the constables were being carried along ahead of them.

CHAPTER VI.—The Pretty Soubrette.

A shout of exultation escaped Herman as the gap between the train and the uncoupled freight car widened rapidly. Snooks kept tightening the

brake, the freighter slackened speed quickly, as it was on an upgrade, and in two minutes the two adventurers—and the two constables were too widely separated for our friends to fear being captured.

"They are crazy with rage!" the boy laughed.

"By the shades of Hamlet, you are cunning to outwit them this way," declared the actor. "Herman, you do me proud."

"Those fellows will notify the train crew of this, and the cars will back down to recover this freight," said the boy. "We must get off and skip away as fast as possible. Here's a woods."

"Going to cut across the country?"

"Not much. We'll hide. The constables will think we've run away. But we'll board the train again while they are hunting for us in the woods."

"The very boldness of the plan ought to make it succeed."

"Now jump down. This car has stopped."

It was very dark there, for the new foliage of the trees almost met over the railroad track. They did not have long to wait. Herman had correctly estimated the sequel. The train came backing toward the place where the freight car stood, and presently paused near it, the lantern fastened to it showing the conductors and brakemen where it stood. Many of the passengers alighted, and thronged along beside the train, but the first who left the cars were the constables. Herman keenly watched them. As soon as they were safely away, the boy dragged Snooks from their place of concealment, and they mingled with the passengers who alighted, and then stole aboard the forward car. Lying down in two seats, and pretending to be asleep, they easily escaped detection, and listened to the excited comments of the passengers about what they had done.

In a short time the car was coupled on, all hands returned aboard, and the train continued its journey, leaving the two deluded officers behind searching the woods for our friends. They soon reached a town, and as Snooks had some money he left Herman and entered a barroom and proceeded to get drunk.

Herman wandered the streets aimlessly for a while, and observed what the theatrical attractions were to be presented there. Nothing of an encouraging nature met his view, and he finally paused before a dingy little store, in which a locksmith and bellhanger was located.

"Here's a chance to have that mysterious metal box opened and learn the strange secret of its contents," he muttered.

Entering the store, he met a frowsy-headed old man in a bluejean apron, and handed him the box.

"Could you unlock this thing?" he asked.

The locksmith examined it critically a while. "I'll try. Where did you get it? This box wasn't made in America."

"Why, it's an heirloom in our family," replied Herman. "How do you know it wasn't made here, sir."

"I can tell by the workmanship. It was made in France. It's a curious thing. The lock is very peculiar. Ordinary means won't open it."

"See what you can do with the thing, please."

"The only way to get at the inside is to break the box," said the man after a long time.

"Oh, but I don't want that done," replied the boy quickly.

"You'll never see the contents unless you do as I say or get the key."

"Very well then; give it back to me. I'll wait!"

"I want two dollars for my time lost trying to open it."

"Two dollars? That's very exorbitant. I won't pay so much."

"You won't, hey? Then you'll not get the box till you do pay me."

An angry flush mantled Herman's dark cheeks, and his brilliant black eyes flashed with resentment. He realized that the man was trying to impose upon him, and he resolved not only not to stand it, but to recover the precious box, too. As it was very evident the man was too strong for him to cope with in a struggle, he suddenly hit upon an expedient. Making a sudden dive between the locksmith's legs, which were then spread widely apart, the boy rose under him and the man fell on the floor. In throwing out his hands he let the box drop. Herman pounced upon it, put it in his pocket, and nimbly leaping over the body of the raving locksmith, he dashed out the door. Down the street he sped, and the furious man rushed after him, burning with a vengeful feeling and yelling at the top of his voice:

"Help! Help! Police! Stop thief!"

A crowd quickly gathered and rushed along with the old fellow. Herman glanced back over his shoulder in alarm, and saw that a rapidly increasing crowd was pursuing him. Several men tried to head him off, but he adroitly dodged them, and turning abruptly into a side street he caught view of the stage entrance of a theater, halfway down the block. There was a dress rehearsal on at the time, and when he reached the door he saw that it was standing partly open. Without the slightest hesitation the pursued boy rushed in, and hurried along a gloomy passage to the stage door.

He had an intense aversion of being arrested. As he stepped upon the stage, pale and breathless, he almost ran against the remarkably pretty singing and dancing soubrette of the company. She was a graceful girl of scarcely more than sixteen, with large blue eyes, plump, rosy cheeks, and short, curly, yellow hair. Her name was Grace Fox. In her hands she held a blue domino and mask which she was to put on when it came her turn to go off the wings.

"Hello!" she exclaimed in startled tones, as she gazed at the boy. "What's up?"

Herman rapidly but briefly told her who he was, and what had happened. While he was so engaged he heard his pursuers rushing in noisily at the outer entrance to the passage.

"Here they come," he gasped. "That's the end of me!"

"Not much," Grace exclaimed. "Put on these things and skip out on the stage. You'll be disguised, and they won't know you."

As she spoke she seized the domino by the hem, flung it over him, clapped the mask on his face, and pulled the hood over his head.

"Go!" whispered the girl, pushing Herman. "I'll protect you."

With his mind in a whirl over this sudden and unexpected good fortune, the disguised boy strode

out upon the stage among the costumed actors, and the girl coolly faced his pursuers.

"Well," what do you people want here, I'd like to know."

CHAPTER VII.—A Bitter Disappointment.

Herman paused in the middle of the stage, where the dress rehearsal was going on, and glanced back at the wing where he left Grace Fox. The pretty soubrette who had so suddenly and kindly befriended him had stopped the locksmith, the policeman and the mob who had been pursuing him at the stage entrance. As the stage manager caught sight of the boy's blue domino on the stage he yelled in savage tones:

"Hey, Grace Fox, get back to that left second entrance, will you? Blast it, what are you going on for before your turn?"

If Herman obeyed he would have to stand within a few feet of his pursuers, and a cold chill passed through him at the idea, for they might then discover his identity. There was no help for it, however, and he obeyed.

"Now see here," said Grace to the crowd. "you'll have to get out. No one is allowed in here during rehearsal."

"But we're after a thief," explained the policeman. "He ran in here a moment ago, and we want to nab him."

"Oh, you're mistaken," coolly replied the plucky, good-hearted little soubrette. "I've been standing here half an hour, and only unlocked that door a moment before you entered. So how could any one have come in unless I saw them?"

"Hey, Miss Fox!" yelled the manager. "There's your cue to go on. Don't you hear the leading lady say, 'And here's the blue domino?' Hurry up! Miss your entrance again and I'll fine you!"

Herman was startled, for he had on her costume, and she ought to have worn it to go ahead with her part. But the girl was equal to the occasion, for she calmly turned to Herman and said in low, even tones:

"Say, miss, will you run around behind the back drop to my dressing-room and fetch my costume?"

The boy nodded and hastened away, realizing that her object was to get him out of the way before the manager arrived.

"Miss Fox!" roared the manager again.

"Say, Tom!" she cried, "come here, will you? There's a mob of people trying to force their way on the stage."

The irate manager rushed up and saw what was detaining her. He thereupon argued and swore at the crowd, and driving them from the stage, he assured them no one was there and bolted the door in their faces.

"Those fellows are crazy," said Grace.

"You get on the stage right away, you jade! You've kept it waiting too long already. What in thunder do you mean by standing here gossiping with those fools when you ought to be at work?"

"Come now, Tom, don't be unreasonable," replied the girl, a flush of indignation mantling her cheeks. "You saw how matters stood, and——"

"I don't care a tinker's curse how matters stood. You know your business. If you don't choose to

follow it, get out and make room for some one who does," snarled the ugly manager.

"Oh, I can do that, too!" quickly retorted the girl, as tears filled her eyes. "I'm no football for you to kick around!"

"Don't you get sassy to me, you little vixen! You're discharged!"

"Do you mean that?"

"Certainly I do. Get out of here."

"I'll go when I get my hat and sack from the dressing-room."

"Then hurry up about it, confound you!" he retorted, and seizing her by the shoulder he gave her a push that flung her down.

The girl uttered a piercing shriek as she fell. Herman had been watching the whole episode from behind the edge of the curtain, and a pang of remorse passed through him when he saw the girl losing her position on account of befriending him. He was thrilled with anger at the manager's culminating brutality. Unable to passively stand it, he flung off his disguise, rushed from his place of concealment and, confronting the man, he cried:

"You infernal coward, let that girl alone!"

"Why—why," gasped the man, staring at him in astonishment, "who the deuce are you, I'd like to know?"

"That's none of your business," retorted the angry boy, as he helped Grace to rise. "You wouldn't have done this if I'd been nearer."

"Well, blast your cheek, I'll kick you out of here!"

And he sprang toward Herman. The boy did not flinch, but as the man got in the reach he let drive with his fist and caught the manager in the eye.

"Oh!" he yelled, pausing and clapping his hand to his optic. "You have blinded me. I'll pay you off for this."

The manager, blinded with pain and fury, picked up a heavy piece of joist and might have brought it down upon the boy's head had not the actors just then rushed from the stage and seized him. One of them advised the boy to hurry out. Grace ran into the dressing-room, and getting her hat and coat, she seized Herman by the arm and dragged him from the theater. She was intensely excited then, tears were streaming down her cheeks, and she looked so utterly forlorn that the boy was melted.

"It's no use staying there," she exclaimed. "It will only lead to more trouble. Tom is an evil-natured brute."

"That's a fact," said Herman. "Did he hurt you?"

"Not much," she replied. "Where are your pursuers?"

"They've all vanished," said Herman, looking up and down the street. "You don't know how grateful I am for what you did for me. And I'm so sorry I was the means of your losing your position."

"Oh, don't worry about me; I didn't think I could get along with that disagreeable manager anyway. I'll get another booking soon."

"Have you the means to get along until you do?"

"Well, no," she replied, in some embarrassment

"My board is paid up to the end of this week, and I've only got a few dollars left."

"That's bad; I'm in a pinch myself, and have got to hustle. Let me take you home, and I'll see if I can get you work."

She smilingly assented, and they walked away together, chatting about their affairs and getting better acquainted. Herman left her at her boarding house. Coming up the street as Herman started away was Snooks, rather under the weather, but able to navigate fairly well.

"Ye gods, I'm glad I've met you!"

"What for?" asked the boy curiously.

"I've got some news for you."

"Name it," Herman exclaimed.

"Read this newspaper item and rejoice, my boy."

He handed the journal to the young magician, pointed at a certain paragraph, and Herman read:

"WANTED QUICK—Three first-class vaudeville artists to fill in show; two men and soubrette, capable of doubling in after-piece. Good salaries to the right parties. Mashers, lushers or bums need not apply. Call on Dick Little, No. 70 D— st., Taunton."

Herman was delighted.

"Just the thing!" he cried enthusiastically.

"Now we're all right. I— Hello—"

"What's the matter now? You look surprised, pained—"

"Look at the date of this paper," said the boy in pathetic tones.

"My Lord!" groaned Snooks disappointedly.

"The paper is a year old!"

"Sold again!" said Herman.

"Look here," said Snooks; "let's start a company. I heard a company had busted up here named the Yankee Fun Makers. I know the manager, man by the name of McGillick. We can get the whole company. Let's try it."

Herman was carried away by the enthusiasm of Snooks, and they were soon in conversation with McGillick, who said he would do all he could toward getting the other members, and he succeeded. So a company was formed with a Miss King, her brother, who owned the opera house, a man named Piper and Grace, the soubrette. The regular play of the Yankee Fun Makers was to be followed, all their dates, etc. The opera house was well filled the first day and on the second day as Herman was leaving his boarding house he was set upon by the major, who had evidently located him, and two others. He was carried in a carriage to the river side, where Herman gave them the slip and, although late for the play, was on his way to the theatre when he was met by Sally King's brother and two policemen, and was accused of staying away from the theatre with the previous day's receipts in his possession. He was arrested and led away.

along after him, increasing his embarrassment. In going to the police station, they were obliged to pass the Opera House, and the young magician saw Sally King in the doorway. She had come out to find Herman, met her brother, and he had gone to look for the boy and had him arrested at sight. A look of surprise mantled her face upon seeing Herman under arrest.

"I've got him," chuckled her brother.

"What is he arrested for, Dan?" she asked.

"Running away with the receipts."

"On whose charge?"

"Mine, of course."

"Why, what right have you to have him arrested, I'd like to know?"

"I did it to protect myself and your troupe."

"You little lunkhead, this isn't my troupe—it's his own. He is the treasurer of the combination. You've made a big mistake. You've no authority to have him arrested."

The Opera House owner looked extremely crestfallen. He suddenly realized that he had been crestfallen.

"You are right, Sally," he said hesitatingly.

"Release that boy, officer, or he may get you all in trouble for your officiousness. He hasn't done anything wrong."

The policeman complied. It was very evident to him that there was an error in the matter.

Herman did not wait to explain matters, for he wanted to get on next, and hastened to his dressing-room. After Snooks' turn before the footlights, the stage was set for the boy's act, and he came from his dressing-room, made up and attired in his stage garments, looking every inch a magician. His natty costume, dark complexion, fine stage presence and inimitable manners, were greatly in his favor. The piano gave him his entrance, and he went on with his ebony wand under one arm, and began taking off his white gloves.

A storm of applause greeted his appearance, for Snooks had announced him as a boy wonder, and every one was curious to see what sort of work he did. Reaching the footlights, he bowed, and having gotten off his gloves he rolled them in his two hands, palmed them in his right, and kept his left hand closed to make the audience think it held the gloves. Taking the wand from under his arm with his right hand, he thus held the gloves between his palm and the stick. He then touched his left hand with the point of the stick, opened the hand, and—the gloves had apparently vanished. Everybody wondered where they had gone to.

It mystified them greatly. They applauded the maneuver, and the boy bowed, smiled, and in going up the stage adroitly concealed the gloves in a receptacle in a table. He then gave the audience specimens of the most astonishing tricks, and among them a most puzzling one which most conjurers use. It was to take a borrowed hat and go among the audience, apparently picking silver half dollars out of the air, from men's whiskers, out of ladies' bonnets, and other unexpected places. This feat was simply one of dexterously palming the same coin.

Herman first provided himself with ten fifty-cent silver pieces, and hiding them in his left hand, he held the high hat in the same hand, en-

CHAPTER VIII.—Before the Footlights Again.

Herman's mind was tortured by all sorts of doubts and fears as he was being led through the street by the policeman. A crowd of curious people, seeing the boy under arrest, came swarming

tirely inverted for the performance of the trick. Borrowing another half-dollar from one of the audience, he seemed to drop it into the hat, but really he palmed it and let one of the coins in his left hand fall into the hat. This action was repeated as he went from person to person, until at length he had let the ten coins fall into the hat, and finished by dropping in the coin he had been palming.

His actions were so deft, natural, quick and graceful that he deceived everybody with each experiment he tried. The applause he received was tremendous, and when he had finished his act he was recalled before the curtain. In a word, the boy was the hit of the show. His performance certainly was remarkable.

"For one so young he's a marvel!" was the general verdict.

The stage was cleared, and the boy stood in one of the wings watching the rest of the performance to see how it ran. Piper's musical moke act went well, and Grace, in skirt dances and serio-comic songs, charmed the gallery. A howl of laughter greeted McGillick's knock-about Irish act, and Sally wound up the vaudeville olio with some choice balads in a deep, rich contralto voice that won her many admirers.

A screaming farce-comedy, which had been faked up, finished the programme, and as all hands "threw" themselves in their parts, they made an immense success of the piece. When the audience filed out of the auditorium they were perfectly satisfied with the show, and the gallery gods attested their approval by the most ear-splitting whistles and yells. The actors repaired to their dressing-rooms to take off their stage clothing, and the lights in the auditorium were extinguished. When the company met in the lobby a short time afterward every one had been told by Sally what had befallen Herman.

"Sure, I thought you'd skipped with the receipts," laughed McGillick.

"How much did you take in?" Piper asked eagerly. "There was a big house."

"Yes," said Sally contemptuously, "but many were deadheads."

"I'll count the cash and compare it with your tickets, Dan," said Herman. "Then we'll pay you for the house and divide the rest."

"The house will cost you fifty dollars."

"I'm satisfied and I'm sure the rest are."

The count and comparison were made, and they found that 900 tickets had been passed in, of which 150 were billboards and 150 were found to be forgeries issued by the swindling printer. Of the 600 remaining tickets 240 were sold for 15 cents each, 160 at 25 cents and 200 at 50 cents, making \$170. Dan received fifty dollars of this money, and the remaining one hundred and twenty-six dollars was divided among the rest, each one receiving twenty-one dollars. It was a small enough sum, but they were glad to get it, and Herman, instead of paying for hiring the dress suit, bought it, as the clothier offered to sell it very cheap. The printer was confronted with the evidence of his rascality, and did not receive a cent for his tickets and programmes.

He was glad to escape arrest. McGillick was sent ahead to the next town as advance agent to negotiate for the hall and printing, and our

friends followed him the next day to a place called Spring Grove. As they boarded the train a man, who had been watching all their movements at the hotel, followed them. He was a detective who had been in the major's employ, and was a dark, dirty little fellow, with a brown mustache. When the train got under way, he entered the car where Herman sat alone in a seat, gazing reflectively out the window. The detective strode over to the seat, and seated himself beside the young magician.

CHAPTER IX.—A Daring Leap.

Ignorant of the officer's identity, Herman glanced around at him in a casual manner, and was just about to turn his attention upon the outside landscape again when the detective remarked:

"I hope I am not intruding upon your seat, young man."

"Oh, no," replied the boy. "There's plenty room for two here."

"Performer, ain't you?"

"Yes; magician."

"Name of Herman?"

"You've struck it. How did you know?"

The detective glanced around furtively to see that no one was listening, and then bending over close to the boy, he whispered:

"I am a detective, in the major's employ."

"And you admit the fact to me?"

"Certainly. It don't make much difference whether you know it or not. I'm to report all your doings to the major."

"What is that man having me followed for?"

"Because he wants to get a queer little steel box away from you, which you stole from your former guardian, Crabb, in Boston."

"I know that; but what's the sense of it?"

"There you've got me; I don't know."

"Well, he'll never get it away from me. I've fought hard so far to keep it, and I'll do so till I see what's in the box."

"Oh, then you don't know yet?"

"No; I haven't been able to get it open."

"I see. Perhaps I could help you."

"No, I thank you," replied Herman. "It won't leave my possession. I'm aware that its contents relates to the mystery of my life, and I intend to learn all about the matter."

"I don't blame you. Have you got the box with you?"

"Of course I have."

"Let me see it, will you?"

The boy pondered a moment, for in this sweetly made request he saw the design of stealing the box from him. He was curious, however, to learn exactly what the detective's game was, and he finally concluded to draw the man out. With this purpose in view, he got a grip on a revolver he had purchased for use in his act, and drew out the steel box.

"I don't mind showing it to you," he remarked, assuming the most innocent look and tone he could command.

The detective took it in his hand and critically examined it.

"The lock has been tampered with," he remarked.

"Yes; I tried to have it opened," replied Herman.

"I see. You'd better let me keep this thing."

"Oh, I guess not," replied the boy quietly.

"You'd better keep still, youngster. If you kick up a row I'll arrest you for stealing the box from Crabb."

The boy burst out laughing. He then hauled out his pistol and aimed it at the detective's face.

"Now you drop that box!" he exclaimed vehemently. "If you don't I'll put a bullet in your carcass!"

A fearful scowl crossed the man's face. He reluctantly obeyed, for he saw by Herman's flashing eyes that the boy's hot temper was stirred up. Then he assumed a ghastly laugh and cried:

"Hold on! I'm only fooling. I only did that to try you."

Herman put the box back in his pocket.

"Get out of this seat," he exclaimed. "It isn't big enough to hold you and me after what has just happened."

The detective slunk away with a whipped air, and darted a malignant look at the boy that spoke all the hatred he felt. Herman simply laughed at him, and stung by the taunt he shook his fist at his supposed victim, and growled:

"I'll down you yet!"

Snooks had been gazing on from a distant seat in surprise, and as Herman beckoned to him he rose and approached.

"Who was that object, my boy?" he queried curiously.

Herman explained. The news amazed the old actor.

"It seems that we are to be hounded all the time," said the boy.

"That major is a persistent rascal," Snooks commented. "It is a shame, sir; a downright shame. You look worried. Have a ball?"

He pulled a flask of whisky from his hip pocket, took a drink himself first and proffered it to the boy.

"No, no; I don't need that," said Herman. "I'm a little nervous, that's all. But I saved the box."

"Bully for you. Shake!"

He shook the boy's hand and put the flask in his pocket.

"I must get this box opened as soon as possible and find out what's in it," the young magician exclaimed.

"Most decidedly you must. It's a hoodoo to you as it stands. Why don't you let me carry it for you. If they should ever tackle you again, then, they'd be sure not to get it."

"That's a good suggestion," replied Herman. "I'll do it."

He felt in his pockets for the box. But he could not find it.

"Well, what are you fumbling for?" asked Snooks.

"Good heavens, the box is gone!"

"Gone?" gasped the actor, in startled tones.

"Yes, gone. I had it in this pocket just before the detective got up. It isn't here now. Let's see if it fell on the seat or floor."

He made a hasty search. But he failed to find the missing box. Finding the search useless, the

boy rose with a blank look delineated upon his features, and asked:

"Could that detective have picked my pocket?"

"Confound him! Where is he?"

"On the train yet, of course, as it hasn't stopped. Snooks, if he gets away with that box, all my hopes will vanish of ever learning the mystery of my life."

"He can't, and won't get away with it!" cried the old actor, banging his umbrella down on a seat with a report like a pistol shot. "If he's on the cars yet, we'll wrest it from him."

"Will you aid me to get it away from him?"

"Certainly I shall."

"Then come ahead."

They ran through the car into the next one at the rear. Here the detective was sitting looking at the metal box, and he was on the watch for an attack. Seeing them coming, he bounded to his feet and rushed into the rear car of the train. They followed him at a run. Out upon the back platform dashed the detective, and as they darted out after him he sprang from the car just as they reached out their hands to seize him. It was a daring leap. He gave a defiant yell as he flew through the air, and they saw him strike the embankment and roll down in a cloud of dust.

"We are foiled!" cried Herman, in tones of anguish. "He's got the box!"

CHAPTER X.—Captured in a Farm Wagon.

The train from which the detective sprang was going at the rate of twenty miles an hour, and although the morning sun was brightly shining Herman and Snooks soon lost view of him. The rascal still had the steel box clutched in his hand, and doubtless expected the major to pay a large reward for its recovery. Filled with intense disappointment Herman and his friend went into the car, sat down dejectedly and fairly groaned. Neither of them expected the officer would hazard a leap from the fast-moving train to escape them. Bellport was left many miles behind, and they were then nearing Spring Grove to where McGillick had gone ahead as advance agent to hire the hall so they could give a show. Unaware of what had happened, Grace, Sally and Piper were in the forward car chatting to pass the time away.

"I've only got \$21 in my pocket, resulting from our show in Bellport," said Snooks sadly, "but I'd give every cent of it to get that detective in my clutches for five minutes."

"I fear," replied Herman, "that I'll never learn what the box contained now. He picked my pockets well."

"We can put the police onto him when we reach Spring Grove."

"That won't do any good," replied the boy. "He will get out of the way as soon as possible now, you can depend."

"What a pity you did not learn the contents of the box ere he got it."

"Regrets are useless," sighed Herman. "Let us join the rest and tell them the news. Perhaps now that the major will get the box, he may cease his attacks upon me."

"Even that would be a relief."

They passed into the other car, and before they reached the place at which they were to alight all the rest heard the news. McGillick met them at the station with a cheerful smile on his good-natured face, and a waving of his hat.

"Hello!" he cried. "I've got good news for you."

"What's that?" asked Herman eagerly.

"I've secured the hall for twenty-five dollars for to-morrow night, bedad!"

"Good for you! Have there been any attractions here lately?"

"None in a month, and you can bet the natives must be hungry for a performance by this time."

"Humph!" coughed Snooks, assuming his most important air and flourishing his umbrella toward McGillick. "As the manager of this vaudeville company, I will gather all the points thereof and act thereon."

"Fire away," laughed Piper.

Snooks thereupon questioned his advance agent closely and found that if they all pooled their money they could pay a two days' board bill, hire the hall and have some printing done. They were all willing to do this. In fact, unless they did, no performance could have been given. Proceeding to the nearest hotel, they made themselves comfortable, and Herman, Snooks and McGillick went out to secure the hall and order the printing.

"If I had a paper," said the comedian as they went along, "I could lithograph these towns ahead of the combination, and the people would be ready for us when you arrive."

"Yes," said Snooks sadly, "but the trouble is, my worthy friends, that the paper is one of the most expensive items in this business. As we haven't got money enough to buy even second-hand prints, we need not think of doing anything in that line yet."

"Should we meet with any sort of success," Herman remarked thoughtfully, "we might do so later on."

"Our only hope in that direction would be to meet an angel," said the old actor. "He'd put up the stuff."

"An angel?" said the boy, in mystified tones. "What's that?"

"In plain terms, a sucker. That is to say, a citizen with plenty money and no brains, who gets stuck on the show business and backs it up with his dollars."

"Oh, I see," laughed Herman. "Are there many such?"

"I'll guarantee that one-tenth of the shows that leave New York are backed that way."

Further discussion of the subject was now ended by their arrival at the hall, where they met the owner, and after an examination of the premises they found it to be small but cozy. It was engaged and paid for. At the office of the local newspaper they had some tickets and posters printed, and ordered some programmes and dodgers. Well satisfied thus far with what they had done, they started back for the hotel and had almost reached it when a strange event occurred. A farmer was driving his team in from the country, and as our friends arrived abreast of him he reined in his horses, and shouted:

"Say, young feller, d'you know where I can find a doctor?"

"Why, yes," replied Herman. "There's one at this hotel."

"I'm glad o' that 'cause I picked up a poor feller some miles back that in the country beside the railroad track with a broken leg. He was groanin' powerful hard and I took pity on the poor cuss and offered to bring him to town to get fixed up."

"Where is he?" quickly asked the boy.

"Here in the wagon."

"Let me see him."

And the young magician stepped upon the hub of the rear wheel, and peered into the big vehicle. He saw a man sitting on the bottom among the potato baskets. As their glances met, a look of surprise and delight flashed over Herman's face, and he cried excitedly:

"Just as I imagined; it's the detective who robbed me, and sprang from the train to avoid capture."

"What?" yelled Snooks. "Oh, good Lord!"

And as the boy climbed into the vehicle, the old actor followed him with the agility of a cat, and saw that Herman had made no error.

"Get back there!" cried the detective, with an oath, as he clapped his hand to his pistol pocket. "If you interfere with me, I'll shoot you!"

"We'll see about that," recklessly cried the boy, seizing the man's arm in a firm grip. "Here, Snooks, search him and get that box."

"You bet I will," exclaimed the old actor.

The detective struggled furiously to resist them for a moment, but the pain in his injured leg caused him to stop. It only occupied a moment for Snooks to find the fatal steel box and pull it from the detective's pocket.

"Saved!" cried the old actor, holding it up. "By the shades of Hamlet's father, this is unexpected good luck."

"Good enough!" Herman exclaimed as he took the box and thrust it in his pocket. "He got his broken leg for nothing."

"You give that box back to me!" roared the exasperated officer. "By heavens, I'll fix you if you don't."

"Not much, you thief," retorted Herman. "You may consider yourself lucky that I don't put you in jail as a common pickpocket."

And leaving the detective raving, and the astonished farmer gaping, they descended to the ground and entered the hotel. The farmer drove the detective away to another hotel, and after our friends had discussed the matter they had dinner. That night they secured the hand-bills from the printer and scattered them through the town. Upon these papers was an announcement of the show in the most florid language Herman could command. Next day they had a rehearsal, and when night came they repaired to the hall for the performance. As usual, Herman acted at the door. The people came slowly. By eight o'clock there were not fifty in the house. A look of anxiety overspread the young magician's face, when Piper thumped the overture on the piano, and the curtain rose, for there were only 72 persons in the audience. That represented \$14.30, and it had cost them pretty near one hundred dollars to prepare for the performance. Not another person appeared up to nine o'clock, and the young magician fairly groaned.

"We are ruined, I'm afraid!" he muttered, as McGillick took his place and he went to the stage to do his turn.

Although that performance was so slimly attended, the next more than paid up for it, and they were able to divide up \$25 apiece at the end of the engagement. The next place they stopped at was named River Falls, and at the first performance Herman was astonished to see the major sitting in the audience. He resolved to play a trick on the rascal. Borrowing a watch from a man in the audience to do a trick with, as the boy explained, he edged up to the major and dropped it in his vest pocket without the major's least idea of such a thing. Then he shouted:

"What do you mean by stealing my watch?"

"I know nothing about your watch."

Calling a policeman, Herman told him that the major took the watch he had borrowed from his pocket and now had it in his vest pocket. Calling the owner of the watch to his side, the boy told the policeman to search the major and he would be responsible for the outcome. The policeman did so, and the watch was found and identified by the owner. Then the major was dragged off to the police station, the gentleman who owned the watch charging him with robbery.

CHAPTER XI.—Opening the Steel Box.

The audience was startled and amazed at the affair, and Herman was delighted to think he at last had a chance to avenge himself upon the man who was thirsting for his life.

"It may have been a mean method of getting the best of him," he pondered, "but he treated me far worse and I had no other means of putting him out of the way of doing me further harm. Besides that, as the steel box is to be opened to-morrow morning, and I did not want him to have a chance to prevent me learning what its contents are, he is now powerless to interfere."

He procured another watch, got the silver piece and went up on the stage. There he made an apologetic address to the audience for what had transpired, and successfully played the trick he had set out to do. Herman's startling, mystifying and amusing work took the audience by storm and the rounds of applause that greeted his efforts filled him with satisfaction. No matter how clever and unconceited an actor may be, it is always a matter of intense pleasure to him to have an audience show their appreciation of his work. After the curtain fell, and the boy got behind the scenes, he was surrounded by the whole company, who wanted to know the particulars of the major's arrest. Herman told them frankly what he had done.

"Great Jupiter!" cried old Snooks, when he finished, and then he slapped his thighs, crowed like a rooster, flung his long arms around the boy, hugged him and added: "Bully for you! Great head, Herman, great head! You're a cooler! My boy, let me shake hands with you. As an artful dodger, you take the bun!"

"I didn't fancy the trick much," Herman replied, "but I had to do something for protection, and that happened to be——"

"No apologies," interposed Grace. "I'm glad you did it, and I hope they will put that wicked wretch in prison for ten years, so there!"

Shortly after the show closed. Herman then counted tickets and box office receipts, and found that each one was about twenty dollars ahead.

"We are making headway slowly," said the boy to Snooks, as they went home, "but we are gradually getting ahead. In due time I expect to have enough money saved to have a first-class company of my own on the road."

"That's only a dream," replied the actor. "I used to think the same thing when I was young and enthusiastic. In fact, I tried it, but I got it in the neck so often, I finally had to quit, poorer and wiser. Perhaps, though, it was because I lacked business talent."

Reaching the hotel, they found McGillick awaiting them. The comedian met them with a radiant smile, and introduced them to a dapper little man with a brown mustache.

"I've been after meeting my old friend, Joe Ranger," said the comedian, "and he's the finest advance agent any bum combination ever sent ahead of a show. He's looking for work."

Herman and Snooks had a talk with the little man and found him to be as smart as a steel trap. He was willing to attend to their advance work for a small salary and expenses, and as they were glad to secure him, he was given employment and sent ahead. With a man who understood this work, our friends knew they would get much better results. Moreover, it made it difficult for McGillick to act as agent and attend to his own part of the show. Ultimately the wisdom of taking on Ranger was shown in the improvement in their business. On the following morning after breakfast Herman linked his arm in that of Snooks, walked down out of the hotel, and when they reached the street, the boy asked:

"Now, how about going to see the steel box opened?"

"Just what I was going to propose," replied the actor.

"Where is the place?"

"Just up the street aways, in a blacksmith shop."

"Oh, yes. I know where the place is."

"Then come ahead and we'll learn the result."

"I wonder what became of the major last night, Snooks?"

"Oh, he must have been put in jail to be tried in court. No danger of him interfering with us again in a hurry."

"Well, I hope not. My life has been a burden to me since he has been on my track. I've been constantly haunted by the fear that he would murder me at any unexpected moment."

"No doubt he would if he had the chance."

"I wonder why he wants to get rid of me?"

"We may find out now, my boy, for here's the shop."

They paused before an old building. Inside there stood a brawny, begrimed young Irishman at a vise bench, working assiduously. Herman and his companion entered, and he greeted the old actor with a nod and pleasant smile, and said:

"Good mornin', sor. I suppose it's afther ther box yez are?"

"Exactly," replied Snooks. "Have you opened it yet?"

"Shure it's wurkin' at it now I am. See, I've near cut it in two. Wid ther wurk av a few minutes I'll have it divided."

"Why don't you finish your job?"

"Kase I wanted you ter be here whin it was opened."

"Quite right—quite right," said Snooks approvingly.

The blacksmith picked up a saw, and set to work again upon the box, eagerly watched by Herman and the actor. Each had his curiosity aroused to a fever pitch now that the box was upon the eve of exposure. The saw cut away into the grooves until finally the metal was severed and the box fell apart. A closely folded paper was disclosed. Herman eagerly seized and opened it. One glance at the contents wrung a cry of vexation from his lips, and Snooks asked in some alarm:

"What's the matter?"

"See here?" replied the boy.

He handed over the paper to the actor. The writing upon the paper was in German. As neither of them could read it they were intensely disappointed.

"What a roast!" growled Snooks. "It's Dutch."

"Perhaps I can get it translated," Herman suggested.

"Unless you do it will be impossible to know what it means."

They paid the blacksmith for his trouble and left the shop. A bell in a neighboring church steeple just then struck the hour of eleven, and Herman glanced up with a startled look.

"Do you hear the time?" he asked, warningly.

"Yes; we've only got fifteen minutes left to get to the train," answered Snooks, hurriedly. "If we don't hustle we'll miss it and have to stop over here until 4 o'clock this afternoon."

"That won't do, as we will have to make all our arrangements in Smithville for the night's performance if——"

"If what?"

"Ranger secured the theatre."

"He did."

"How do you know?"

"I got a telegram from him this morning."

"Good! That chap is a regular hustler."

They rushed back to the hotel, got their luggage, and then hastened to the railroad depot, where they found all the rest impatiently waiting for them. Procuring their tickets, they got aboard the train, when an officer rushed up with a subpoena for Herman to appear in court that day as a witness against the major. The boy saw the policeman coming, and as he was the same one who had been in the theatre on the previous night, Herman recognized him at once. Moreover, he suspected what the man wanted, and as he did not wish to be delayed, he made up his mind to elude the officer if possible. It mattered little to him then whether the major got free or not, now that he had seen the contents of the box. Besides this, Herman knew that if he were put on the witness stand he would be compelled to swear to his evidence. Should he then declare his enemy had stolen the watch he would commit perjury, and this he would not do. It placed him in a try-

ing position from which there was no escape, unless he succeeded in evading the officer, for once the legal paper was served on him, he would be compelled to obey the summons. Herman was sitting by the car window when he saw the officer, and rapidly bounding to his feet he whispered in hurried tones to Snooks:

"Here comes the policeman with a paper in his hand, and I'll bet he intends to haul me into court as a witness. I'm going to dodge him. Don't give me away."

And so saying, he rushed through the car. Just as the policeman entered the rear door, the boy went out the forward one and reached the ground. Running along beside the car forward of the one he had been occupying, the boy crept into a baggage car. There was a long, deep open box standing at one side in which express parcels were carried. It had a spring lock, but Herman did not notice it and thinking the box was a good place for concealment, he sprang in and pulled down the lid. The lock snapped with a loud click and he laid there quietly until at length the train started.

"I'm safe now," he thought, as he felt the cars running along. "Very likely Snooks has steered the policeman away by this time. I guess I'll get out of the box."

He strove to lift the lid, but it resisted. No matter how hard he tried he could not move it and get out. A dreadful fear now began to haunt his mind.

"As soon-as the air in this box is exhausted," he muttered, "I'll smother."

CHAPTER XII.—A Revelation.

As the 11 A. M. train for Smithville rushed along over the rails, carrying the company from River Falls, a search was made by Snooks for Herman, but he could not find the boy. The officer who had come aboard to subpoena the lad had left in disgust when he failed to find him and get him as a witness against the major, who was to be arraigned in court that day. Herman was in a dangerous predicament, locked up in the express package box, in the baggage car. It was very evident to him that he would smother to death if he remained there long enough. He pushed, pounded and kicked at the lid of the box, but it firmly resisted all his efforts to open it. Then he yelled for help, and created a furious uproar, but all to no purpose, as no one was in the car, and the rumbling of the vehicle drowned all the noise he made. Gradually the interior of the box grew oppressively hot, and as the air was used up, the boy found it hard to breathe. This difficulty intensified every moment, until at last it seemed to Herman as if he would soon perish. His struggles and clamor ceased, and he finally lay gasping, his mind tortured with agony and his lungs racked with pain.

"I can't survive this!" he thought bitterly. "It will kill me."

A tremendous pressure all over began to stifle him, and at the end of five minutes more his senses began to leave him. Slowly but surely a stupor crept over the boy, and he drifted into a

dreamy state, and then lapsed into unconsciousness. It was then but a step to death. But before the grim messenger could call him, the train reached the station, and an official entered the car and opened the box to take out one of the express parcels. He saved the boy's life by letting in the fresh air, and when he recovered from his astonishment, he pulled Herman from the box. It did not take the boy long to revive after that and explain how he happened to be there. Going back to the car in which he had left his friends, Herman detailed what had occurred and the whole party had not ceased speaking about the matter when they reached Smithville. Here they found that their new advance agent had made a good business arrangement for them by securing a pleasant theatre. As they had plenty of money between them, they quickly concluded all their arrangements for a show that night, and ultimately opened up a good business and a fair profit. From that time forward fortune favored them, for they were now able to get out attractive paper for their agent to bill ahead, and with the ready cash secured the best of houses. A run of four weeks followed, during which they fairly coined money, and gradually kept getting nearer to New York. The large metropolis was finally reached and a large theatre was there secured and awaiting them for a week's run. It was the largest theatre and the longest stand they yet had, and on the day they were to open with several extra people in the olio secured for the purpose, a rehearsal was held. Every one was delighted. At the conclusion of the rehearsal Herman called all his old friends together on the stage and said to them:

"Before you go away I wish to say a few words to you. As you are aware, we commenced this variety show under the most difficult circumstances. By perseverance and energy we have worked up from nothing to a good paying investment and begun a reputation for ourselves. From poverty, rags, and almost starvation, we have secured money, good clothing, and the best kind of living. We now have a week's run ahead, with the prospect of making a very large sum or losing nearly all the cash we have made. Then we will disband. Each one will have to shift alone, unless a new arrangement is made whereby we can continue this show."

"My dear boy," said Snooks, "I not only speak for myself, but for all the company, when I ask what new arrangement have you in view?"

"I will tell you," replied Herman. "It is my intention to organize a company of my own, and pay good salaries instead of keeping up the co-operative plan we have been following. If any of you would like to join it, I will take you out on the road again for a six weeks' circuit before the season closes. Should you fear to risk it, as you all know, you are at liberty to sign with other established companies."

They were all startled at the boy's boldness. But they had been with him long enough to know that young as he was, his ability was unquestionable to navigate them through a successful engagement. The first to speak was Grace Fox, and she said:

"Well, you are a beaut, Herman. I'm with you."

"And I, my dear boy, through thick and thin," Snooks added.

"You can count on me, too," added Sally King, vehemently.

And as for McGillick, Billy Piper and the rest, they could not give their assent quick enough. This matter settled they dispersed. Herman and the old actor left the theatre together. While they were walking through Sixth avenue, the young magician caught view of a sign over a door worded:

"Prof. W. H. Schmitt, teacher of languages and translator."

It gave the boy a good idea, for he pulled the paper from his pocket which he had taken from the steel box, and he said:

"Snooks, read that sign. Here's my chance to have this mysterious paper translated into English at last."

"Just the plan!" eagerly assented the old fellow. "I'm itching to find out what that document says; I am, 'pon my word."

"Then come in, and we'll settle this mystery now."

Ascending the stairs and entering the professor's apartments, Herman told him what was wanted and handed him the paper. The man of languages glanced at the writing, sat down at his desk, took pen, ink and paper and made the translation.

"One dollar," he remarked, handing the papers to Herman.

The boy paid it, and both he and Snooks read the translation.

"A will!" exclaimed Herman. "See, it is dated in New York fifteen years ago, and it is signed by a man named Philip Herman. How queer. The last name is the same as my own."

"Yes," replied Snooks. "And it bequeaths real estate, valued at over half a million dollars, to his only child and heir, Frank Herman. Here's a clause—in case the child dies, the fortune is to go to Philip Herman's law partner, Major Ralph Oakdale——"

"The major!"

"Yes, your enemy, no doubt!"

"And this Frank Herman——"

"Must be you!"

"Great heavens!" gasped the agitated boy.

"Philip Herman must have been your father. Good Lord, can't you see through the whole thing? It's as plain as day."

"Why," stammered the young magician, "what do you mean?"

"Just think. There the major paid Crabb to keep you in ignorance of your parentage all these years, and that must have been done so as to prevent you claiming this fortune. Didn't Crabb tell the major he would be a ruined man if you ever learned the contents of that steel box? That meant that the major secured the fortune by falsely representing you as being dead, of course. Would the rascal have hounded you and tried so hard to kill you if he didn't have a deep purpose behind all his actions? What, more than money, could have been his incentive? Mark my words, he feared you'd learn this and wrest his ill-gotten gains from his grasp."

Herman was fairly stupefied with astonishment,

for Snooks' version had a singularly plausible sound. When he finally recovered his faculties he asked:

"But how could we prove your theory?"

"Nothing easier," replied the old actor. "Don't you see that the will is signed by three witnesses? All New Yorkers, no doubt, whose addresses we can probably find in a directory. Let us hunt them up, and find out more about this strange matter, my boy."

They left the amazed professor and began the search. The names of the witnesses to the will were Kate Maloney, Hiram Wood and Edwin Hoyt, and a reference to the directory showed them that Wood and Hoyt were in partnership as lawyers in Temple Court. Herman was Snooks went there, and found the men of law in. The boy explained the object of his call, and asked in conclusion:

"Could you tell me about Philip Herman?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Wood. "He and Oakdale were partners in the law business until Herman died. Herman was a German—a man of peculiar ideas. He had made a will, locked it in a singular steel box, and always carried it about his person. When he died no will could be found, and his son had disappeared. Oakdale thence onward assumed control of his estate. We proved in court the will, written in German, which we attested. As the child never was found, and it was concluded he died, Oakdale got possession of the property. He holds it in trust till such time as the child would have become of age. If the boy fails to materialize then, the major inherits the property."

"Let me tell you my history now, and see if I ain't the missing heir," said Herman, and he recited all known to the reader.

The lawyers were impressed.

"Put your case in our hands," suggested Mr. Hoyt, "and we will sift it through and put this will before the surrogate for probate."

Herman readily consented.

"The chief thing," said he, "is to prove my identity."

"Yes," assented Mr. Wood. "Kate Maloney was Mr. Herman's child's nurse, and we always suspected she knew what became of it after it was stolen from its baby carriage while she had the infant in the park."

Herman readily agreed. After some further conversation he and Snooks went away from the office and descended the elevator. Down on the main hall, as they stepped from the elevator, they were startled by suddenly coming face to face with no less a personage than the major. They paused and glared at each other for a few moments in deep silence.

CHAPTER XIII.—Conclusion.

As soon as the major recovered his self-possession, he made a threatening gesture to Herman, and roared in furious tones:

"What! You here, you little fiend?"

"Your sight don't deceive you," replied the boy, with provoking coolness. "But I'm surprised to see you. I thought you were in jail."

"Well, I'm not," snapped the angry man. "With you gone and the owner of the watch unwilling to press the charge, I was discharged. It is my impression you put that timepiece in my pocket to get me in trouble."

"You don't say," replied Herman, with a smile.

"If I could prove it, I'd—well, never mind what I'd do. My turn is coming. I'd like to know what you are doing here?"

"Would you? Well, ordinarily I would have told you it was none of your business," replied the boy. "It may interest you to learn, though, that I've had that steel box opened and read the will it contained——"

"Blast the luck!" ripped from the major's pale lips.

"Yes, and I find that Philip Herman, my father, left me quite a snug fortune which you are at present enjoying. I have also learned that it was to retain that fortune that you have been attacking me, and trying to prevent me learning this secret."

"I know nothing of what you refer to——"

"Humbug! Wood and Hoyt do——"

"Then you've seen them?"

"Yes, and they've got the will, and are going to fight this case for me. I am now going to see Kate Maloney to get her evidence, and then—your downfall will occur."

The major was panting hard. All Herman's words stung and infuriated him. He was foolish enough to let his violent temper get the best of him, and drew a revolver. Leveling it, he recklessly fired at the boy. Fortunately, though, the bullet missed its mark, and ere he could repeat the dastardly act, a policeman rushed up, knocked the pistol from his hand and arrested him. A crowd gathered and Herman went to the station and made a charge of felonious assault against the man. The major was locked up. When Herman and Snooks left the station and proceeded to Kate Maloney's address, the boy remarked:

"It's a good thing the major is arrested. It will prevent him from interfering with us in the unraveling of this mystery."

"To that I agree, my boy," replied Snooks. "And it will make it all the easier for us to do the work, my dear fellow."

They soon found Kate Maloney living in a tenement with her brother, and they told her what they wanted. She gazed at Herman a moment, and then cried:

"Why, it's ther picture yer are av yer dead an' gone mother. Shure I'd know ye among a thousand. Tell yer ther history av yer abduction? Av coorse I will, me jewel. I remimber it all very well."

"Do you know who stole the child?" asked Snooks.

"I do. It wor this way. Jist afther ther choild's mother died, I had ther little wan in his baby carriage in ther park. whin up coom Mr. Oakdale, an' he gives me a tin-dollar bill an' ses he'd take care av ther young wan whoile I wint ter git change av ther money. He had wid him a hunchback blackguard whom he called Crabb."

"Yes!" cried Herman, excitedly. "That's the man who raised me."

"Well," proceeded Kate, "whin I come back faith ther carriage wuz in ther lake an' ther baby

an' Crabb wor gone, an' ther major towld me ther little wan was dhrowned. He towld me ther carriage had run down the embankment av its own accord. I wuz that frightened I didn't know what to do at all, at all. Then Mr. Oakdale advised me ter say ther young wan wor shtole. I did so, an' lost me job. That wor ther lasht I ever seen av ther family."

"Did you once witness Mr. Herman's will?"

"I did that, an' he put it in a square little metal box. Ther day ther poor baby an' I wor ready ter go out, ther choild had ther box playin' wid it. He'd found it on ther bedrume flure. I let him kape it whin I tuk him out. An' bedad, whin he wuz dhrowned, ther box dishappeared wid his poor little body entoirely."

"That must have been the way the hunchback got hold of the box," commented Herman. "The whole plot is clear. When this woman went off to get the bill changed Crabb ran away with me, and the major ran the carriage into the lake to deceive this poor woman."

"No doubt of it," replied the old actor. "Do you, my good woman, know of any mark upon the missing child's body by which it could be identified if you were to see him again?"

"I do," promptly replied Kate, "for it's manny's ther toime I have bathed ther little wan an' seen ther quare figure. It wor three great big moles on his roight arrum in ther forrum av a shamrock."

Herman bared his arm. He had exactly such a birthmark.

"Is this it?" he asked, quietly.

"Faith, it's ther same, an' I'd shwear to it," excitedly replied the woman, as she gazed intently at the mark.

"That settles the matter, Herman," said Snooks, triumphantly. "You have a clear case and if old Crabb is yet living you can easily have him, this woman, the Messrs. Hoyt and Wood and the major himself put on the witness stand. There won't be the slightest trouble to establish your identification."

After some further talk with the woman they departed. On the following day they went to court and succeeded in having the major tried, convicted and sentenced for the murderous attack he had made. This done, they notified the lawyers of all that transpired and reported that they had begun operations to have Philip Herman's estate taken from Oakdale. It would occupy a long time to prove and arrange everything in a satisfactory manner, so Herman left them. They were to report to him what progress they made. The boy then went to the theatre. A most successful week's business ensued, and long before Saturday most everyone in New York was talking about the phenomenal boy magician's wonderful work.

When the last performance of the week was given, the company disbanded, and each one went their own way several hundred dollars richer than when they started. Herman then began to make arrangements for a tour, and was kept pretty busy for a week or more. When he finally got his company together and rehearsed them, it is doubtful if there was a stronger combination in the city. Some new people with great specialties were added to the regular company, two good

musicians were secured, Ranger was sent ahead with attractive paper, and they were billed for many first-class houses through the West. Then they started off. It is almost needless to say that with everything in their favor, they met with the greatest success. Herman was in his element. He had discovered his ability as a manager, and when the show finally came back, he was richer by several thousands of dollars, and sure of return dates.

The season had closed, however, and he had no expectation of doing anything until the following fall. He therefore devoted all his time and attention to securing the fortune that had cost him so dear. It finally proved to end as he expected, however, for once he had established his identity beyond the shadow of a doubt, the authenticity of the will was proven. Then the evidence of the witnesses was given, and the major was taken from prison and forced to confess. He was staggered when he discovered how clear the boy's case had become. Further concealment of the facts was therefore useless on his part, and he finally admitted that he had been the cause of all the trouble. He acknowledged that Herman was the missing heir and offered to relinquish all his claims on the fortune. It did not take long to settle the case after that, and the surrogate transferred the care of the fortune to Wood & Hoyt for the boy, and the major's sentence was increased. The rascal suffered a well deserved punishment.

As for Herman, although he was then placed above the necessity to struggle for existence, he did not give up working. His variety show to the present day is one of the finest on the road, and he and Grace are now engaged to be married. Snooks is still with them, and so are several of the rest who had commenced with the boy when he was poor and almost friendless. It is not our intention to follow the boy any further, for he has won fame and fortune by his own pluck and perseverance, and therefore merited our approbation.

Next week's issue will contain "TOM BARRY OF BARRINGTON; OR, THE HERO OF NO. 4."

ANT BEARS VALUABLE.

Experiments are being made in Yakima, Wash., by fruit and vegetable growers with the ant bear, whose natural home is in the central portion of South America, as a means of destroying grasshoppers, melon bugs and aphids, which are a pest in Northwest States.

Edward J. Hiner produced three of the animals, two females and one male, from the Government experimental station in the City of Mexico, and they are rapidly becoming acclimated and fattening on the insect diet.

The ant bear destroys potato bugs, locusts and other injurious insects with great avidity, seemingly eating all the while. Unlike its northern cousin, the ant bear does not hibernate in the winter, and as there are fewer insects during the cold season, Hiner has taught the bears to sleep in his greenhouses, and while in that semi-tropical temperature they can keep down the insects that endanger the winter culture of tender plants.